WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS

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WASHTENAW'S CONTRIBUTION TO BIOLOGY

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It is my purpose to confine my remarks to a general account of the discoveries of the animals and plants of our area, avoiding dates and other statistics. The study of biology in Washtenaw County is intimately connected with the growth of teaching and research in the University of Michigan. Many of these investigations have, of course, had nothing to do with the local fauna and flora. This is true even of those investigations which were of a geographic and ecological nature.

While small sporadic collections were made in our territory prior to the 1870's, the first rather serious attempt to determine the plants and animals which inhabit Washtenaw County can be placed at the time when Dr. Joseph B. Steere became Professor Zoology in the University. He and Dean C. Worcester brought considerable prestige to the University, but, unfortunately for Washtenaw biology, they were both primarily interested in the fauna and flora of the tropics and made only a few direct contributions to our knowledge of the animals and plants of the area.

Apparently, however, either by precept or example or both, Dr. Steere encouraged a number of local amateurs who did significant work, and whose papers and other records made a substantial foundation for future studies. Certain of these pioneer amateurs we must not fail to remember for the good work they did for our County. A. B. Covert of Ann Arbor laid a foundation for our knowledge of the birds of this region. The University is desirous of securing all of his papers that we can locate. . .Norman Asa Wood was the son of a Lodi Township farmer and sheep-raiser. He had little formal education, but by his own efforts he made a field naturalist, yes, I can also say, a scientist out of himself. A long time before I myself appeared on the museum scene, Mr. Wood was known for his wide knowledge of the birds of Michigan. Perhaps his greatest contribution was the genius he had for inspiring young students to pursue ornithology as an avocation, and many younger men in other professions will never forget what they owe to him. I sincerely hope that his comprehensive work on the Birds of Michigan will soon be published. . .Bryant Walker, a Detroit lawyer, was inspired by his father to begin collecting shells, and pursued this avocation

throughout a long life. His routine used to allow the practice of law from early morning until about 4:30 in the afternoon, and the study of shells from then on through the entire evening, and all his summer vacations were devoted to the study. As a result of this devotion, he became one of the greatest living authorities in his field. . .Charles Davis was a teacher in the Botany Department, but all of his spare time was spent in the field seeking out new knowledge of the plants of this region.

During the period following Dr. Steere's tenure, the great emphasis in zoology and botany was on morphology, embryology, and physiology. When I first came to Ann Arbor, no naturalists in the general sense of the term, except Mr. Davis and Mr. Wood, were to be found on the staff of the University. Fortunately this did not discourage the amateurs, and to the little group that I have mentioned were presently added such men as the following: one butterfly enthusiast, the late W. W. Newcomb, of Ann Arbor; and four bird students: A. D. Tinker of Ann Arbor; Alexander Blaine, distinguished Detroit surgeon; Bradshaw H. Swales, who later removed to Maryland; and the late Jesse Ricks, president of a large industrial company until his recent death. Also must be remembered the many students who went out into the field with one or another of these men day after day and made collections, but whose names we do not have because they did not publish.

In the early days when Frederick C. Newcomb and Jacob Reighard were heads of the departments of Botany and Zoology, there was considerable discussion about the importance of field work vs systematic studies. These discussions became less strenuous after Dr. Charles C. Adams, a pioneer in the field of ecology, joined the staff of the Department of Zoology, and Dr. Transeau and later Dr. Gleason came to the Department of Botany. Dr. Adams' vigor and keen interest in ecology and field work gave great encouragement to the amateurs and to students who anticipated careers in field biology, and considerable impetus to the study of local animals and plants. His work was supplemented by that of Dr. Kauffman in mycology, whose extraordinary energy and zeal led some of us to maintain that he had every unemployed man, woman, and child engaged in searching the County for mushrooms for his collections or his skillet.

Slowly our information on the wild life of the County grew, until at the present time we have a fairly good knowledge of the species and their distribution. I regret to say that, with the increase of interest in native forms taken by members of the University staff and the staff of the Michigan State Norman College at Ypsilanti, the amateurs have quite largely disappeared from the scene. In my opinion this is most unfortunate, since there is still much to be learned of the ecology and habits of our local species of plants and animals. It is to be regretted also that some of our professional taxonomists are failing now to take what should be the next step in the study of local forms, that is, experimental work to determine the factors involved in local habitat distribution.

We used to talk at great length about the values to be derived from nature study. I do not hear today that much consideration is being given to these values by adults. This is extraordinary, because in many European countries the amateurs as well as professionals are promoting nature study both for its contribution to health and recreation and for the mental discipline it provides. We seem to be inclined in the United States, or at least in Michigan, to leave the study of biology to those who are engaged in it professionally, and except for such agencies as those associated with the protection of game, forestry, and the Audubon Society, I see little indication of the development of general interest in our wild neighbors.

The natural history work of our two University departments of Zoology and Botany is highly commendable and has greatly broadened our concepts and contributed to our knowledge of local forms. Geography, limnology, morphology, and other phases of biology are receiving good attention. It should now be recognized that the old-time taxonomy is outmoded; the time has come to concentrate on ecology, speciation, and genetic relationships. This should not discourage the amateur, for the study of habits and ecological distribution are worthwhile avocations. Sociologists are coming to recognize the training value of field biology, for they see that their subject really deals with one group of animals and its ecological relations.

You will note that I have omitted many names of men and women who have made contributions to the biology of Washtenaw County after the pioneer days. If I undertook to make a list it would be a long one. My main objective has been to bring out three facts: that the identity of forms in our area is beoming well known; that the time has now arrived to concentrate on environmental relations and factors; and that the study of these phases of biology will not only provide effective recreation but will contribute to our understanding of social problems.

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Note:-

Volume IV of Washtenaw Impressions consists of:
No. 1, December, 1945 (wrongly dated Vol. III, No. 1), 9 pp.
No. 2, April, 1946, 16 pp.
No. 3, September, 1946, 3 pp.